THE FORBIDDEN PATH

By IZOLA FORRESTER

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"It's a perfect shame. Look at that lawn! Cut right straight across from the lilacs to the sidewalk, as if we kept a little chain gang of elephants trotting over it. I won't have it, Nell! I'll turn the hose on those boys!"

"Don't jabber over it, Kit. You'll only get all red and warm and fussy, and some one may hear you."

Kit scowled defiantly at the broad bay window of the house next door. The shades were lowered and the blinds half closed. On one window sill a plump tortoise shell cat dozed comfortably. Peace evidently reigned within, and it was the habitation of the enemy.

"I don't care who hears me. Whoever hears"— Kit raised her voice ever so little, just enough to carry over the tortoise shell cat. "They must know all about it anyway. How would they like it if we trampled paths all over their lawn day and night?"

"There comes one of them." Nell paused in her sweeping on the little vine covered porch and waited anxiously. "Now, don't be huffy, sis."

Kit sat immovable in the dandelion starred grass and watched the coming boy with disapproving, menacing eyes. He was rather a nice boy to look at, too, somewhere around fifteen, and he whistled as he came along the sidewalk in front of the Norton cottage. There was a break in the low box hedge, made by vandals, but this vandal disdained it and added insult to injury by jumping over the hedge and boldly starting across the path.

"How do, Miss Norton?" he called cheerily. "Pretty hot today, isn't it?"

"Say, Dick McLean, we don't want you three boys tramping over our lawn." Kit spoke with dignity and severity. "It makes a regular beaten path all the way to your lilacs, and I think you could use your own lawn if you want to make a checkerboard on the grass."

Dick halted midway on the forbidden way and looked at its undeviating course of barrenness with interest.

"It does look queer," he said. "I'm awfully sorry we did it. When old Mrs. Tisdale lived here she didn't give a rap about it. It wasn't a lawn then. She just hung up her wash here, and she kept chickens too."

"Well, we don't," retorted Kit most ungraciously. "Ever since we moved here I've been trying to coax a real croquet lawn out of a wilderness of chickweed and plantain. We only had the hedge put in as a gentle hint to our neighbors"—

"You mean us, don't you?" Dick smiled down on her good naturedly.

"Yes, I do," granted Kit, "because it really was all the fault of you boys, and you don't care. You even jump right over the hedge."

Dick got over on his own side hastily. "Well, I'm sorry I jumped, Miss Norton," he said contritely. "And I'll tell the other boys to keep off too. Goodby."

Kit's curly head nodded an unwilling response as she bent over the pansy bed again.

"He heard every word." Nell sat down on the top step and laughed.

"How do you know?"

"The cat went indoors, and she never does unless he is at the desk."

There was a pause, and the pansies suffered from too vigorous treatment.

"Well, I don't care if he did," said Kit finally, but her tone was lower. "If they don't stop it I'll put up barb wire."

It was not an idle threat, though it needed provocation to carry it out. Two days later, just at noon, a happy, leisurely procession passed over the lawn. Even Dick, the traitor, was leading and whistling in sweet forgetfulness, with a baseball bat over his shoulder. Kit said nothing. The point had arrived where mere wrath was futile. Early on Saturday morning she superintended the placing of her outposts of defense, and by the time the boys appeared a neat array of barb wire strands were stretched along beside the hedge.

"It's all right for the boys," said Nell critically. "But what if Mr. McLean"—

"If he can't make his little brothers behave, then we will. It's bad enough living next door to a perfect old crank, on your summer vacation anyway, without being on intimate terms with him. Even mother says he's eccentric, and that means crank."

"He doesn't look like one."

"Well, he is, all the same. All writers are cranks, and the more successful they get the crankier they are, so Mr. Kirke Ross McLean must be a terror. And he doesn't write books, either; not real books. He only travels and writes; doesn't make up a thing out of his own head."

Nell did not answer. She was looking over at the cool, darkened bay window and thinking of the figure beyond the tortoise shell cat, a figure that, sitting at the broad, flat top desk near the window, sometimes turned to gaze over the hedge where the pansies grew and the croquet balls clicked.

"Just you wait," said Kit, following her glance. "Some day those boys will forget and take a run over that path and tumble in the wire, and we'll see a double twister turned."

Sunday evening supper was a matter of individual vagary and caprice so far as the Norton family was concerned. Molly went home after dinner, Mrs. Norton went upstairs for a cozy nap about twilight, and the girls usually took iced tea and salad sandwiches out on the porch, where they could lie in the hammocks, a book in one hand and a sandwich in the other, safely screened from prying eyes by the wistaria vines. The Sunday following the putting up of the wire the hammocks were occupied, when some one came along the sidewalk with a quick, firm tread and deliberately walked through the broken place in the hedge and across the path.

Kit gave a smothered exclamation and sat up, but before she could speak there was the sound of a fall at the barb wire guard, and the girls rose with frightened, yet half laughing, faces.

"Hello!" called Kit gently. "Are you hurt?"

There was no response for a minute, then some one answered in a strange voice:

"I beg your pardon, but would you mind ringing our bell and calling the boys? My foot is twisted, and I cannot stand up."

An hour later Kit stood guiltily at the head of the steps as her mother and Nell came slowly from the house next door.

"Will he be sick long?"

"About a month before he can walk," said Mrs. Norton. "It is too bad. And he is a very delightful person to meet; not at all eccentric. He takes the blame entirely and says he is worse than the boys and that we were perfectly right in putting up the wire."

"That's what he said to you, motherie, darling," interposed Nell disconsolately. "He probably thinks that Kit and I are heathens."

"Barbarous heathens," Kit smiled wickedly.

"This is far from being a joke, Katherine," said Mrs. Norton. "I am afraid you must both do penance by being as kind as possible. Of course he is a—a"—

"Crank?"

"A celebrity," corrected her mother. "We may find him odd, but after this misfortune we must do our best to make him comfortable. I told him you would take turns in bringing him flowers."

"Well, I won't, motherie," said Kit flatly. "I'm sorry he hurt himself, but I'm not a bit sorry I put up the fence, and I don't want to be forgiven."

In the days that followed they could see the strong, patient figure sitting in the shady corner of the veranda next door. Nell carried the first propitiatory bunch of roses over to the enemy's country. She brought back a good report, and after a week of disinterested indifference Kit suddenly announced her intention of being flower bearer to his majesty. She found him a totally disabled, rather sarcastic majesty.

"So you're the young woman who set the trap, are you, Miss Kit? And you're not a bit sorry?"

"I'm sorry I came over to see you." Kit stood erect, very haughty, very sweet and very young. "I only brought the flowers."

"And you didn't expect to be scolded?" She knew he was laughing at her. "Please sit down. Don't you know I've been hoping every day to have you visit me and beg my pardon?"

"I won't do any such thing." She met his eyes defiantly. "You hadn't the least right to cross there, only—only I meant it for the boys, of course." Her glance fell to his swathed foot. "I'm sorry you were hurt."

"That will do very well." He was laughing openly now. "It covers the personal side for me, you see. You're not sorry you hurt me, but you're sorry I'm hurt. Please sit down and talk to a fellow, won't you?"

Kit hesitated, flushed warmly under his teasing gaze and took a seat on the hickory settee.

Four weeks later McLean took his first walk. It was a slow, tedious one from the veranda to the hedge.

"I came halfway for my roses today," he said to the figure in white beside the rosebushes. "May I come over the hedge?"

Kit did not even turn her head.

"Are you angry?" His voice was low and eager. "After last evening I was afraid you might not come again, Kit."

She turned and walked toward him slowly, the bunch of roses held close to her face. At the hedge she looked up at him, and the merriment had died from her eyes.

"I was just coming," she said softly.

His hands closed over those that held the roses.

"To say 'Yes,' sweetheart?"

"Look out for the barbed wire, Mr. McLean," called Nell from the sitting room window. "Kit still guards her forbidden path."

"All wires down!" called McLean. "It's the path of roses now. I claim the right of way."

The Hangman's Stone.

There is a large bowlder lying in a field near Foremark, England, which is known throughout Derbyshire as "hangman's stone." The exposed portion of the bowlder rises about six feet above the surface of the surrounding field and has a narrow ditch or indentation running across the top. The mark, so tradition says, was made in this way: A sheep thief in the dead of night, while leaning against the bowlder to rest, placed his booty above on the flat surface of the stone. The man had the sheep tied with a rope, and in its effort to escape the creature slipped on the opposite side, and the rope, catching under the thief's chin, choked him to death. The indentation in the rock was made by the friction of the rope while the dying man was engaged in an effort to extricate himself.

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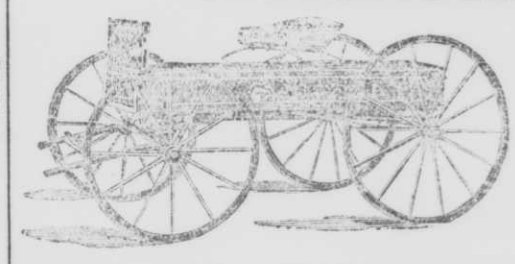

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